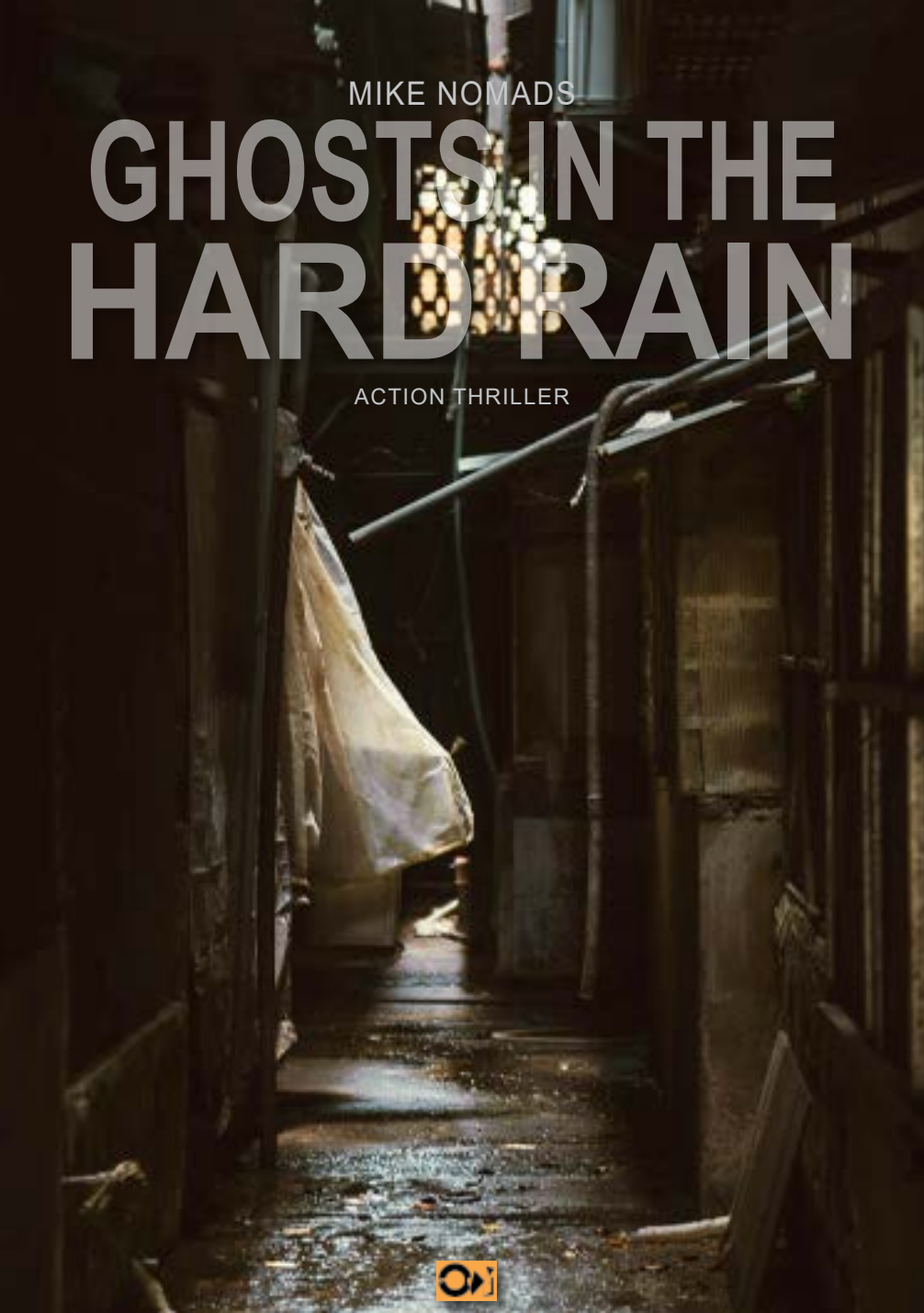
MIKE NOMADS
GHOSTS IN THE HARD RAIN
ACTION THRILLER

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Mike Nomads

Ghosts in the hard rain

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Three Years Ago
Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

The rain came down like a baptism, washing the dust and blood from Sergeant First Class John "Jo" North's hands. He knelt in the mud of a foreign land, the acrid smoke of a burning Toyota Hilux stinging his eyes. The fire painted the night in shades of hellish orange. In the back of the truck, four men lay still. Bad men. The kind who beheaded aid workers and sold children.

Jo wasn't thinking about them. His world had narrowed to the man in front of him.

Captain Marcus Thorne lay on his back, his breath coming in wet, ragged gasps. A piece of shrapnel from the IED they'd tripped had found the gap be-

tween his body armour and his hip. Jo had his field dressing pressed against the wound, his other hand gripping Marcus's shoulder.

"Stay with me, Captain," Jo said, his voice a low growl over the drumming rain. "That's an order."

Marcus, his face pale as a ghost, managed a weak, bloody smile. "You always… had to have the last word, North." He coughed, a spatter of crimson on his lips. "Tell Jen… tell her..."

"You tell her yourself," Jo snapped, his jaw clenched so tight it ached. He could feel the life seeping through his fingers. The medevac was ten minutes out. Ten minutes in this world was a geological age.

Marcus's eyes, once sharp as a hawk's, were growing dull. "The mission… the data we grabbed… it's more than just this. It's a… ghost. A key. Don't let them bury it. You get out… you find the rest of the ghosts…" His hand, slick with blood, weakly grabbed Jo's wrist. "Promise me."

"You're not dying, you stubborn son of a bitch," Jo hissed, though the lie tasted like ash.

“Promise me,” Marcus rasped, his grip tightening with the last surge of a dying man’s strength.

Jo looked into his friend’s eyes, the man who’d pulled him from a burning Humvee, who’d shared his last ration bar, who’d taught him that loyalty wasn’t just a word. “I promise.”

A final breath escaped Marcus Thorne. His hand went slack. The rain kept falling, indifferent and cold, as the distant thrum of rotors finally pierced the night.

Jo bowed his head, the baptism complete. He was no longer a soldier. He was something else. A man bound by a promise to a ghost, holding a data chip that felt like a live grenade.

The client

Present Day
Marseille, France

The mercenary business ran on diesel, desperation, and discretion. Jo North, who now went by the single name "North" on invoices that moved through three shell companies, had all three in spades.

He sat in a waterfront café, the Mediterranean sun glinting off the water like shattered mirrors. He was a lean man, built of corded muscle and restless energy, his close-cropped dark hair showing the first whispers of grey at the temples. A faded scar ran from his ear to his jawline, a souvenir from a job in Kinshasa that he didn't like to discuss. To any casual observer, he was just another expat nursing an espresso, his gaze fixed on the yacht-dotted harbour.

His focus, however, was on the reflection in a polished chrome napkin holder. Two men in ill-fitting linen suits sat three tables behind him. They'd been there for an hour, sweating through their jackets despite the shade. Amateurs. Professionals didn't sweat.

His phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number, '*the tide is high at midnight. Bring your sea legs*'.

He'd been waiting for this message for a month. It was the final confirmation for a job so classified it didn't have a name, only a cash retainer that had already landed in a Cayman Islands account he maintained for "consulting fees."

The client, a shadowy consortium calling itself the Thorne Group, had found him. They'd come with whispers of a ghost and a key. Just like Marcus said.

He was about to stand when a shadow fell over his table. Not the amateurs. This was a woman who moved like a panther, all coiled grace and predatory stillness. She was tall, with skin the colour of rich mahogany, her black hair pulled back in a severe ponytail. She wore a simple white blouse and tailored black pants, yet looked more dangerous than anyone

in the café. She slid into the seat across from him without an invitation.

"You're hard to find, Mr. North," she said, her accent a cultured blend of London and something West African. Her eyes were the colour of dark honey, and they missed nothing.

"I'm not lost," Jo said, not touching his espresso. "And it's just North."

"My name is Adjoa Mensah." She placed a manila folder on the table, her hand resting on it. "I'm your liaison for the Thorne Group. I was beginning to think you'd decided to keep the advance and disappear."

Jo's eyes flicked to the folder, then back to her. "If I was going to disappear, I wouldn't be sitting in a café you could find on Google Maps."

A flicker of a smile touched her lips. "Fair point." She slid the folder across. "This is your operational briefing. The target is Dr. Aris Thorne. No relation to the group's founder, just an unfortunate coincidence."

Jo's blood ran cold. Thorne. It was a name that had

haunted him for three years. He opened the folder, his face a mask of professional indifference. Inside was a photo of a man in his late fifties, with a kind face and wire-rimmed glasses. *Dr. Aris Thorne, PhD – Quantum Cryptography.*

"He was snatched from a research facility outside of Innsbruck four days ago," Adjoa continued, her voice low and steady. "The intelligence we've gathered places him at a private military compound in the Krkonose Mountains, in the Czech Republic. The facility is owned by a front company for a man named Sergei Volkov."

Jo knew the name. Volkov was a former GRU colonel who'd gone private after the fall of the Soviet Union. He dealt in secrets, weapons, and people. The worst kind of people.

"Volkov wants what's in Dr. Thorne's head," Adjoa said. "A new encryption algorithm that can crack any current military or financial firewall. He gets it, he sells it to the highest bidder, and the global balance of power tips like a capsizing ship."

Jo closed the folder. "You have a satellite imagery? Blueprints? A window of vulnerability?"

Adjoa reached into her pocket and placed a small USB drive on the table. “Everything we have. The compound is a converted Cold War-era listening post. Granite walls, a geothermal power source, and a sixty-man security force. They call it ‘The Bunker.’” She paused, her gaze intensifying. “Volkov is holding him there for seventy-two hours to ‘soften him up.’ After that, he brings in a specialist interrogator. A man named Kael. If Kael gets to Dr. Thorne, the extraction becomes a body recovery.”

“I don’t work with a team,” Jo stated, a final test.

“You do now,” she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. She gestured with her chin toward the two men in the ill-fitting suits. “Those amateurs you’ve been watching? They’re with the Czech intelligence service, an offshoot that’s been compromised by Volkov. They’re here to make sure you don’t reach the LZ. They’re not here to follow you. They’re here to kill you.”

The two men suddenly stood, their chairs scraping the cobblestones. One of them was reaching inside his jacket.

Jo moved without thought. His hand shot out, flip-

ping the café table onto its side with a crash of shattering ceramics. The espresso cup exploded against the chest of the first man as Jo grabbed Adjoa by the arm, yanking her from her chair.

"Move," he commanded, his voice the cold bark of a squad leader.

A silenced pistol coughed ...phut, phut and a bullet splintered the wooden café chair where Jo's head had been a second before. The other tourists screamed, scattering.

Jo pulled Adjoa behind a stone planter overflowing with bougainvillea. He already had his own weapon out—a compact .45 ACP he'd had custom-built, with a suppressor of his own design. He moved with a fluid, economical violence that was his true tradecraft.

He leaned out, put two rounds into the first gunman's thigh, and watched him crumple. The second gunman, panicking, fired wildly. Jo was already gone, circling around the planter. He came up behind the man, slammed the heel of his hand into the back of his skull, and brought his pistol butt down on his wrist. The man's gun clattered to the ground. Jo kicked it into the harbour.

"Who sent you?" Jo snarled, his forearm pressed against the man's throat, pinning him against a café pillar.

The man, his face red and terrified, spat in Jo's face. "Volkov sends his regards, mercenary. He knows you're coming. He's waiting."

Jo headbutted him. The man went down like a sack of potatoes.

Adjoa appeared at his side, her composure barely ruffled, a small Sig Sauer in her hand that she handled with practiced ease. "Impressive. Though a little theatrical."

"Theatrical keeps you alive," Jo said, wiping the spittle from his face. He looked at her, a new piece of the puzzle clicking into place. "You're not just a liaison. You're the team."

"I'm your cover, your intel, and your ride home," she said, pocketing her weapon. "But for the heavy lifting inside the Bunker, you're getting backup. Someone you'll appreciate."

A black, armored SUV with tinted windows screeched to a halt at the curb. The rear door swung open.

A woman stepped out. She was shorter than Adjoa, built like a fireplug, with a shock of short-cropped fiery red hair and a face that looked like it had been carved from granite by a sculptor who'd had a personal grudge. She wore tactical pants, a black long-sleeve shirt, and a chest rig that held more firepower than Jo had seen in some African militias. Her pale blue eyes locked onto Jo with the warmth of a glacier.

"Sergeant North," she said, her voice a raspy alto that had been yelled raw on a thousand firing ranges. "You still owe me twenty bucks from the poker game in Bagram, you bastard."

Jo stared. A ghost from the past, given flesh and freckles. "Gunnery Sergeant Maeve O'Malley? They told me you'd gone into private security after you got your walking papers."

"I prefer 'Private Military Consultant,'" she said, cracking her knuckles. "And my walking papers were for 'gross insubordination and unauthorized use of explosives.' Best write-up I ever got." She jerked her

thumb at the SUV. “Now get in. We’ve got a scientist to rescue and a Russian asshole to inconvenience. And I get to save your sorry hide again.”

A reluctant grin touched Jo’s lips. It was the first genuine one in three years. “Like hell you do. I saved *your* hide in Fallujah.”

“Revisionist history,” Maeve scoffed, climbing back into the SUV. “Let’s go. My tactical package is on a plane waiting in Nice. We have less than forty-eight hours to turn a Cold War bunker into a very expensive coffin.”

Jo looked at Adjoa, who was watching the exchange with a raised eyebrow. He looked back at the café, the groaning gunmen, the chaos. Then he looked at the folder in his hand, at the face of Dr. Aris Thorne, a man whose only crime was being brilliant.

He thought of Marcus Thorne, bleeding out in the mud, extracting a promise with his last breath. *Don’t let them bury it.* This wasn’t just a job. It was the key. And Volkov had just made himself the lock.

He tossed a handful of euros on the ground for the ruined café, nodded to Adjoa, and slid into the SUV.

“Alright,” he said, the engine roaring to life. “Let’s go make some ghosts.”

The bunker

The Krkonose Mountains were swathed in a thick, primal forest of spruce and pine, the kind of woods that felt ancient and watchful. A hard rain, a mirror of the baptism in Kandahar, lashed the canopy as Jo lay prone in the undergrowth, the stock of his customized HK417 pressed against his cheek.

Through the thermal scope, the Bunker was a white-hot hive of activity against the cool blue of the mountain. It wasn't just a bunker; it was a fortress. A granite cliff face had been carved into, with a steel-reinforced main gate, a hJopad carved into the forest, and a perimeter dotted with motion sensors and camera towers.

“Your intel on the patrol routes was good,” Jo whispered into his throat mic. “But the sensor grid is tighter than you said.”

“I am adjusting,” Adjoa’s voice came back, calm and clear in his earpiece. She was in a van three klicks away, her fingers dancing across three laptops, her presence their digital guardian angel. “I’m feeding them a loop. You have a seven-minute window to reach the maintenance culvert. Starting… now.”

“You hear that, North?” Maeve’s voice was a low buzz in his other ear. She was positioned two hundred meters to his left, her position marked by a small IR strobe. “Let’s go. I’m getting dew on my new boots.”

Jo moved. He flowed through the forest like a shadow, his movements practiced and silent. He reached the culvert, a rusted metal tube jutting from the cliff face that was meant for drainage, with three minutes to spare. Maeve materialized beside him, her face streaked with camouflage paint, a suppressed MP7 slung across her back.

“Miss me?” she whispered, her breath fogging in the cold.

“Like a haemorrhoid,” Jo replied, pulling a cutting torch from his pack.

He worked quickly, the blue flame hissing against the rusted grate. In ninety seconds, the steel bars fell away with a soft clatter he caught with a gloved hand. He went in first, the tunnel tight and reeking of damp earth and cold metal. Maeve followed, her weapon up.

They emerged into a service corridor lined with humming pipes and conduits. The air was warm and tasted of ozone. Jo consulted the blueprint on his wrist-mounted tablet. Dr. Thorne was being held in a converted communications hub on the third sub-level. Maximum security.

“Adjoa,” Jo murmured. “We’re in. Status?”

“Alarms are quiet,” she replied. “But Volkov has a closed-circuit network I can’t fully penetrate. The internal security is analog. Old-school.”

“Which means motion sensors and guys with guns,” Maeve sighed. “My favourite.”

They moved through the labyrinthine corridors, hugging the shadows. The Bunker was a contradiction, a high-tech security shell containing a primitive, brutalist heart. They passed through a decommissioned reactor hall, the hulking, dormant machinery like the bones of a dead titan. Twice, they had to flatten themselves into alcoves as patrols of hard-faced mercenaries in tactical gear stalked past.

Jo's heart pounded a steady, familiar rhythm. This was the clarity he'd been missing for three years. The world narrowed to the next corner, the next threat, the next step.

They reached the door to the communications hub. It was a massive, riveted steel slab with a manual wheel lock.

"Maeve," Jo said, pointing to a security camera in the corner. "That's on a local loop. When I open the door, it'll trigger a silent alarm on their internal system. We'll have maybe two minutes before they swarm."

"So we work fast," she said, hefting her MP7. "I like it."

Jo grabbed the wheel, his muscles straining. With a groan of protesting metal, it began to turn. With a final *clunk*, the door swung inward.

The room was a circular space, once filled with Cold War-era electronics, now gutted and refitted as a cell. A single bare bulb hung from the ceiling, casting harsh shadows. In the center, strapped to a steel chair, was Dr. Aris Thorne.

He looked terrible. His lip was split, one eye swollen shut, and his shirt was stained with sweat and blood. But his one good eye, behind the cracked lens of his glasses, held a defiant spark.

He looked up as they entered, his expression shifting from fear to confusion.

"Dr. Thorne?" Jo said, crossing to him and kneJong to examine his restraints. "We're here to get you out. I'm North. This is O'Malley."

"They said… they said you were coming," Thorne whispered, his voice hoarse. "I didn't bJoeve them. They said my nephew sent you."

Jo froze. His fingers, which had been working on the lock of the handcuffs, went still. He looked up at the scientist's battered face. *My nephew.*

"Your nephew?" Jo's voice was a low, dangerous whisper.

"Marcus," Thorne said, his eye welling with tears of pain and relief. "My sister's boy. He always said… he said if anything ever happened to him, there was only one man he'd trust. A man who kept his promises."

The world tilted. Marcus's ghost, which had been a silent passenger in Jo's soul for three years, suddenly spoke. *Find the rest of the ghosts.* This wasn't just a job. This was the promise, fulfilled.

"Your sister's boy was a good man," Jo said, his voice rough. He resumed working the lock, his hands steady despite the storm inside him. "He made me promise to find the key. I think this is it."

A low, mocking clap echoed from the corridor behind them.

"A touching reunion. Truly."

Jo and Maeve spun, weapons raised.

A man stood in the doorway. He was tall and gaunt, with slicked-back silver hair and a face that looked like it had been carved from a glacier. He wore a black suit that cost more than most people's cars. Beside him, two guards levelled assault rifles.

"Sergei Volkov," Jo said, his aim centered on the man's forehead.

"And you must be the famous Mr. North," Volkov said, his accent a cultured, menacing purr. "My men in Marseille were quite upset with you. I was hoping you'd come. You see, Dr. Thorne here is brilliant, but stubborn. He believes his family will save him. I needed to show him the futility of that hope." He smiled, a cold, reptilian expression. "And now, I have the man who killed my favourite asset. A Captain Marcus Thorne, was it? The one who stole the first iteration of this encryption from a GRU safe house three years ago."

The data chip. The promise. It all snapped into focus. Marcus hadn't just stumbled on the mission in Kandahar. He'd been chasing this ghost—this key—for years. And he'd died for it.

"You're going to let us walk out of here," Jo said, his voice eerily calm. "Because if you don't, I'll put a round through your skull before your men can twitch."

"Will you?" Volkov chuckled, unimpressed. He held up a small remote detonator. "This entire sub-level is wired with C-4. Enough to turn us all into a fine red mist. You kill me, my finger relaxes, and your mission ends in a very loud fashion." He tilted his head. "Or, you put down your weapons, I get the algorithm from Dr. Thorne, and perhaps I let you leave with a bullet in a less vital area. A professional courtesy."

Maeve's jaw was set, her finger tight on the trigger. "Jo," she murmured.

Jo's mind raced. He looked at the detonator, the guards, the calculating look in Volkov's eyes. Then he looked at Dr. Thorne, who was watching him with Marcus's same stubborn hope.

"You're a smart man, Volkov," Jo said, slowly lowering his rifle. "But you made one mistake."

"And what is that?" Volkov asked, his smile widening.

"You let me get close enough to see your tell."

Jo's hand moved faster than the eye could follow. He wasn't reaching for his sidearm. His hand went to his chest rig, not for a weapon, but for a small, magnetic disc he'd palmed from Maeve's pack before they'd entered—a breaching charge she called a 'door-knocker.'

He slapped it onto the steel floor and dove, grabbing Dr. Thorne's chair and yanking it backward. "MAEVE! DOWN!"

Maeve was already moving, throwing herself behind the massive steel door.

The charge detonated with a deafening CRACK. The sound was a physical force, slamming into the room. The floor buckled, sending a spiderweb of cracks racing across the concrete. Volkov screamed, his hand spasming on the detonator as the shockwave threw him and his guards off their feet.

But the explosion wasn't the only thing Jo had planned. It was the cue.

In the service corridor below, Adjoa had been waiting. She'd used the seismic signature of the breaching charge to mask her own, smaller detonation, cutting the main power line to the sub-level. The lights died, plunging the room into absolute blackness.

Jo's world became sound and instinct. He ripped off his night-vision goggles, flooding his sight with a ghostly green. He saw Volkov's guards scrambling, their own NVGs not yet activated. He saw Maeve, her MP7 already spitting suppressed fire, dropping one guard with two to the chest.

Jo drew his .45. He fired once. A guard aiming a rifle at Maeve crumpled. He fired twice more, the rounds punching into the electrical panel in the corridor, sending a shower of sparks and plunging them deeper into darkness.

"Dr. Thorne! Stay low!" Jo shouted, unhooking the man's restraints.

Volkov was on his feet, his face a mask of fury in the strobing light of the sparks. He was yelling into a

radio, calling for reinforcements. The detonator was gone, lost in the chaos.

"Time to leave!" Maeve yelled, her voice cutting through the gunfire. "Adjoa! We need an exit! Now!"

"Main gate is locked down," Adjoa's voice crackled, strained. "But the hJopad is active. One chopper, rotors turning. It's your only way."

Jo grabbed Thorne, half-carrying him toward a side corridor Maeve was already clearing with controlled bursts of fire. "We're going up! Maeve, take point!"

They burst into a stairwell, the sound of their boots echoing off the concrete walls. Above them, the shouts of more guards. Below, the thunder of pursuit.

"Maeve, suppress!" Jo yelled, pushing Thorne up the stairs.

She pivoted, firing a sustained burst down the stairwell, buying them precious seconds. They climbed, level after level, Thorne's weight a heavy anchor but Jo's adrenaline a roaring engine.

They burst out onto the roof. The rain was a solid

sheet, the wind whipping. In the center, a black Mi-17 helicopter sat on the hJopad, its rotors a thrumming blur. A pilot was in the cockpit, his face going pale as he saw them.

Jo didn't slow. He shoved Thorne toward the helicopter's open side door and drew a bead on the pilot. He didn't fire. He just smiled, a feral, terrifying grin, and pointed at the passenger seat with his free hand.

The pilot, a mercenary, not a martyr, raised his hands and scrambled out the opposite door, disappearing into the night.

Maeve was right behind them, her MP7 clicking empty. She slid into the helicopter, grabbing Thorne and hauling him aboard.

"North! Let's go!" she screamed.

Jo was about to follow when a figure emerged from the stairwell. It wasn't a guard. It was Volkov, his suit torn, a pistol in his hand. He didn't fire at Jo. He fired at the helicopter.

A round pinged off the fuselage. Another shattered a side window.

Jo turned, his .45 coming up. He and Volkov stood ten feet apart, the rain lashing between them, the roar of the helicopter filling the night.

"You think this ends here?" Volkov shouted over the noise, his eyes burning with hatred. "You've taken one man. I will take everything you are. I will find your ghosts and bury them with you."

Jo's finger tightened on the trigger. He could end it. One round. But the promise wasn't about revenge. It was about the key. It was about getting Marcus's uncle out alive.

He fired.

His round didn't hit Volkov. It struck the railing beside him, a shower of sparks that made the Russian flinch and dive back into the stairwell.

Jo turned and vaulted into the helicopter. "GO!" he yelled at Maeve, who was already sliding into the pilot's seat.

The helicopter lurched into the air, the rotors chopping the rain into a swirling mist. Jo looked down to

see Volkov emerge onto the roof, a new gun in his hand, firing uselessly at the sky.

As the Bunker shrank to a dark wound in the mountain, Jo collapsed into a seat beside Dr. Thorne, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The scientist was shivering, but alive. He looked at Jo with an expression of profound gratitude and sadness.

"Marcus spoke of you often," Thorne said, his voice barely audible over the rotors. "He said you were the only man he trusted to finish what he started."

Jo pulled the data chip from a sealed pocket in his vest, the one he'd carried for three years, the ghost Marcus had died for. He held it out to Dr. Thorne.

"He made me promise to find the rest of the ghosts," Jo said. "I think I just did."

Thorne took the chip, his fingers trembling. He looked at it, then at Jo, tears mixing with the rain on his face. "This… this is the foundational algorithm. Without this, what Volkov has is a lock without a key."

"Then let's make sure it stays that way," Jo said, leaning back, the adrenaline beginning to fade, leaving a bone-deep weariness. He looked at Maeve, who was focused on flying them through the storm, a grim smile on her face.

Adjoa's voice came over the radio. "I have you on scope. A friendly exit is waiting at the border crossing near the German line. Good work, North. All of you."

Jo looked out the window at the black expanse of the mountains, the rain streaking the glass. For three years, he'd been running from a ghost. Now, he realized, he'd been running toward it all along.

He wasn't a soldier anymore. He wasn't even a mercenary.

He was a man who kept his promises. And in this hard rain, that was enough. For now.

The End

Ghosts in the hard rain

Mike Nomads

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MIKE NOMADS

GHOSTS IN THE HARD RAIN

ACTION THRILLER

Mike Nomads, an ugly divorcee middle-aged adventurer navigating the treacherous waters of family law, spending his days wrestling with legal briefs, his weekends bicycling and mountain climbing and his nights wrestling with existential dread in the form of action-packed short stories. His protagonists, thankfully fictional, never file for alimony and always manage to escape explosive situations with a witty one-liner and a perfectly timed headbutt.